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SUBJECT: SOUTH OSSETIANS AGAIN BLOCK WORK OF OSCE

¶1. (SBU) OSCE officials have described to us how representatives of the South Ossetian de facto army and de facto intelligence service stopped an OSCE/UN team March 19 and confiscated cameras and video equipment. OSCE intends to send a letter to de facto officials to protest this interference, which violates OSCE's status in the zone of conflict. The incident occurred when the team was on the second day of a waste management assessment that had been requested by the de facto authorities themselves. De facto and Tskhinvali city officials accompanied the team throughout the visit, and once the security services intercepted the OSCE/UN team, these officials began making phone calls in an apparent attempt to call the security services off. OSCE suspects the security services were alerted to the team's presence by personnel at a nearby North Ossetian peacekeeping post. During the incident the security services accused the OSCE/UN team of spying. The South Ossetian office responsible for the Joint Control Commission later returned the cameras and equipment to OSCE.

¶2. (SBU) OSCE believes the incident reflects a lack of coordination and control inside the de facto administration. It comes on the heels of another incident February 28 when a group of young men "verbally and physically abused" the Georgian and OSCE participants in a Joint Monitoring Team (consisting of the three sides of the Joint Peacekeeping Force -- Georgia, Russia, and North Ossetia -- plus OSCE) attempting to investigate an explosion at a de facto government building in Dmenisi. The South Ossetian actions prevented any effective investigation of the bombing by OSCE and the cause of the explosion remains unclear. Russian and North Ossetian JPKF observers did obtain access later and interviewed a witness, but they did not determine who was responsible for the explosion. OSCE is concerned that these two incidents suggest an emerging pattern of harassment and interference in OSCE's work.

¶3. (SBU) OSCE is also concerned about the recent detention of a number of local residents of the town of Java, in the north of South Ossetia, allegedly because of their connection to the Karkusov brothers, influential Java residents who are allied with the pro-Georgian Temporary Administrative Unit of Dmitry Sanakoyev. ICRC officials told us March 19 that the de facto authorities had refused to permit ICRC to visit the detainees. Allegedly two of the detainees were transferred from Russian to South Ossetian custody after they were initially detained in Vladikavkaz.

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